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DAVID WILLIAMS/WASHINGTON

BRITAIN AND RHODESIA

ANNCR:

BRITAIN SAYS IT IS PREPARED TO TAKE A MORE ACTIVE PART IN RESOLVING THE RHODESIAN QUESTION AND SOME OBSERVERS SEE THIS AS A POSSIBLE BREAKTHROUGH IN WHAT HAS BEEN DEADLOCK AT THE GENEVA TALKS ON THE FUTURE OF RHODESIA. VOA AFRICAN NEWS EDITOR DAVID WILLIAMS HAS THESE OBSERVATIONS.

VOICE:

BRITISH FOREIGN SECRETARY ANTHONY CROSLAND TOLD PARLIAMENT IN LONDON THURSDAY (DECEMBER 2) THAT BRITAIN WAS PREPARED TO PLAY A DIRECT ROLE IN A PROPOSED INTERIM GOVERNMENT IN RHODESIA. UP UNTIL THAT ANNOUNCEMENT, BRITAIN WAS RETICENT TO DO ANYTHING OTHER THAN ACT AS CHAIRMAN OF THE GENEVA CONFERENCE IT CONVENED MORE THAN A MONTH AGO. BUT IT HAS BECOME MORE APPARENT THE LONGER THE GENEVA TALKS DRAGGED ON THAT LITTLE IF ANYTHING WAS BEING ACHIEVED.

THE CONFERENCE FIRST BOGGED DOWN WHEN THE NATIONALISTS DEMANDED THAT A CABINET LEVEL OFFICIAL ACT AS CHAIRMAN. BRITAIN INSISTED ON IVOR RICHARD REMAINING AS THE TALK'S REFEREE, AND THE ROLE OF REFEREE WAS ALL BRITAIN WAS PREPARED TO ACCEPT. THERE WERE MORE WEEKS LOST OVER SETTING A TARGET DATE FOR INDEPENDENCE. THE CONFERENCE EVEN SPENT CONSIDERABLE TIME TRYING TO SET A DATE TO CONCLUDE ITS WORK, WHEN IN ACTUAL FACT IT HAD NOT EVEN BEGUN TO TACKLE THE JOB AT HAND -- SETTING UP THE STRUCTURE FOR THE INTERIM GOVERNMENT.

THIS WEEK OTHER ISSUES WERE SHELVED, AND FACE TO FACE TALKS BETWEEN WHITE AND BLACK DELEGATIONS BEGAN ON THE INTERIM GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE. BUT IT BECAME MORE OBVIOUS AS THE DELEGATIONS INSISTED ON DIFFERING DEMANDS, THAT IT WAS

BRITAIN ITSELF THAT WAS AT THE CENTER OF THOSE DEMANDS -- TO DO SOMETHING CONSTRUCTIVE TO SAVE THE TALKS. ONE NATIONALIST LEADER, BISHOP ABEL MUZOREWA CALLED ON BRITAIN TO PLAY A POSITIVE ROLE IN THE TRANSITION. AT THE SAME TIME, THE COALITION BETWEEN ROBERT MUGABE AND JOSHUA NKOMO APPEALED TO LONDON TO OVERSEE THE TRANSITION AND GUARANTEE THE LASTING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AN INDEPENDENT ZIMBABWE -- AS THE NATIONALISTS CALL RHODESIA -- AND GREAT BRITAIN. FOR SEVERAL WEEKS AFRICAN STATES HAVE APPEALED TO BRITAIN TO PLAY A MORE DIRECT ROLE. THE PRESSURES ON LONDON HAVE BEEN OVERWHELMING.

A FEW WEEKS AGO, THE CHAIRMAN OF THE SO-CALLED FRONTLINE STATE, TANZANIAN PRESIDENT JULIUS NYERERE SUGGESTED THAT BRITAIN APPOINT THE DEFENSE AND POLICE MINISTRIES IN THE INTERIM GOVERNMENT. PRIME MINISTER IAN SMITH HAS INSISTED THAT THESE POSTS BE IN WHITE HANDS. THE NATIONALISTS HAVE REJECTED THIS. THE HAND THAT CONTROLS THE MILITARY HOLDS THE REAL POWER IN MANY AFRICAN COUNTRIES, AND THE NATIONALISTS NO DOUBT ARE CONCERNED THAT A RIVAL GROUP MAY CONTROL THESE POSTS.

IF THE PRESSURES ON BRITAIN TO RESUME COLONIAL RESPONSIBILITY WERE OVERWHELMING, THE FORCES OPPOSING AN ACTIVE ROLE WERE JUST AS GREAT. A TROUBLED BRITISH ECONOMY, THE CONTINUALLY SLIPPING POUND STERLING, AND A RAZOR-THIN LABOR MAJORITY IN PARLIAMENT WERE PRESSURES AGAINST INVOLVEMENT. THE SUN SET LONG AGO ON THE BRITISH EMPIRE AND THE WHITEMAN'S COLONIAL BURDEN OF RUDYARD KIPLING IS LONG SINCE PASSED.

BUT IT BECAME EVIDENT AS THE GENEVA TALKS DRAGGED ON THAT THERE WAS NO OTHER WAY. FOREIGN SECRETARY CROSLAND SAYS BRITAIN WILL ONLY PLAY A DIRECT ROLE IF THERE IS GENERAL

AGREEMENT BY ALL PARTIES. THAT SEEMS LIKELY. THE SPECIFICS OF THAT ROLE, HE SAYS, WILL DEPEND ON THE STRUCTURE OF THE INTERIM GOVERNMENT. AND THAT IS STILL TO BE DECIDED IN GENEVA.

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